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Japanese Americans interned in WWII fear for Arabs' safety

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FROM STAFF REPORTS

WASHINGTON -- California Reps. Bob Matsui and Mike Honda spent their toddler years behind barbed wire, victims of America's conviction during World War II that Japanese Americans were threats to national security.

Now as the United States prepares for war against an enemy without borders but with a known ethnicity and religion, these lawmakers and others worry that Arab Americans could face similar injustices.

Arab Americans across the country have reported more than 350 specific threats of violence and assaults against them since officials named Islamic extremist Osama bin Laden the suspected mastermind behind the terror in New York and Washington, D.C. Five killings are believed to be hate crimes, a spokesman for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee said.

"We can seek out the perpetrators without victimizing our citizens," said Honda, D-San Jose. He was an infant when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941. Months later, in the name of national security, his family was uprooted and moved to the barracks of the Granada Relocation Center in Amache, Colo.

"Targeting people because they have the same religion or ethnic background, that's not the American way, even if it has been a part of American history," he said.

Matsui, D-Sacramento, was a year old when the government ordered his parents to abandon their home and wholesale produce business. They lived at Tule Lake Interment Camp until he was three, but of those years Matsui said he remembers little -- just a vague image of a mess hall and the recollection of driving back to Sacramento at the war's end with no home to return to.

Sixty years later, Matsui said he is confident history will not repeat itself. But, he said, the country's leaders have to take it upon themselves to make doubly sure.

As recently as the hostage crisis of 1979, he recalled, one U.S. senator -- California Republican S.I. Hayakawa -- called for the imprisonment of all Iranian noncitizens living in the United States.

Luckily, he said, Hayakawa "was ridiculed, and people basically thought he was a clown." With President Bush and New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani setting national examples of outreach, he added, he is less fearful of political leaders exploiting tragedy.

"People are speaking out, saying we need to temper our remarks, that we need to be careful. Hopefully, that kind of discussion by our national leaders will result in lowering the decibel level," he said.

Nevertheless, the same visceral reactions of fear and anger that ultimately prompted the Japanese-American internments have already reared up against Arab-Americans:

In a Dallas suburb someone fired six shots into an Islamic Center.

In Northern Virginia, someone smashed bricks through the window of an Islamic bookstore, with notes attached addressed to "Arab murderers."

Closer to home, an Arab-American convenience store owner in Fresno County was shot and killed last week in what his family believes was a hate crime.

A South San Francisco mosque closed shortly after the September 11 attacks after a series of threatening calls. Arab-American students at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Stanford University reported receiving death threats.

Leaders across the Bay Area condemned acts of violence and harassment against Arab Americans.

Rep. Anna Eshoo, D-Palo Alto, said Americans should "look to the sins of the past" to make sure that future wrongs aren't visited upon Arab Americans of the kind suffered by Japanese-Americans.

Said Honda, "There's always the possibility that if we're not vigilant it could happen again."